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A failure of brains, not eyes

President Reagan is trying to blame the bombing of the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut on damage he says was done to American intelligence agencies during the Carter administration. He's wrong in so many ways it isn't easy to sort them all out.

First, the attack on the annex in Beirut did not come without warning. American intelligence had picked up signs of trouble brewing and had passed them on. Maybe not the license number of the bomb-laden vehicle or the precise time of day the attack would come, but it did not take a superspy to suspect that if the terrorists struck they might do it the way they had twice before since President Reagan took office.

Within days of the bombing of a U.S. Senate corridor last fall, barricades designed to stop car bombers were installed at the White House, the Capitol, the U.S. mission at the United Nations in New York and at other government facilities around the world. It falls to Mr. Reagan—not Mr. Carter, Lyndon Johnson or Grover Cleveland—to explain why something like that was not in place in Beirut.

Perhaps the warnings of danger were not acted upon because intelligence agencies today—as they have since man first began to spy—too often cry wolf. But if there was a failure of intelligence here, it was not for want of eyes. Brainpower and judgment maybe, but not eyes.

Then there is Mr. Reagan's curious idea of history. The intelligence agencies did go

through a disastrous period, but you can't say it was limited to the Carter administration. Nor can you blame it solely on Democrats.

Sure, former President Carter must take responsibility for the demoralization of the Central Intelligence Agency under Admiral Stansfield Turner. It was the lowest point in the agency's 37 years of service.

But this was only the culmination of a long process. The intelligence agencies were victims of post-Watergate skepticism and their own failures, over decades, to subject their conduct to the applicable legal rules. For decades the agencies had operated in a dream world in which they thought law and public opinion had no force.

They learned otherwise, and it damaged U.S. intelligence capacities. If any single president is to bear a disproportionate part of the blame for this, it would be Richard Nixon, not Jimmy Carter. It was the Nixon administration's extension of the principles of deceit and lawlessness that finally brought the whole thing down.

If President Reagan wants to look for intelligence failures, he ought to be worrying about more recent problems—the repeal of rules designed to keep intelligence activities in line with what the American public and legal order can tolerate, and CIA Director William Casey's habit of rewriting agency analyses to fit the White House's ideological preconceptions. It is President Reagan's intelligence network. He is responsible for it, just as he is responsible for whatever went wrong in Beirut.